

AN ERA OF ART AND LEARNING

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SUMMARY

In the half century from 479 B.C. to 429 B.C., the world of learning was blessed with an era of plenty. This short period stands out above all others in the history of man as the one in which genius so abounded and culture made such progressive strides. Philosophy, drama, poetry, architecture, sculpture, and painting all had their champions—among them names the world has never forgotten. The names of Socrates, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Pindar, Phidias and Polygnotus stand out as beacons in their field, men whose contributions to the world of art and learning still amaze this modern world. If a man were asked to pick that one period and that one place which saw the richest and most valuable products of the human mind, his choice would have to be the city of Athens as it flourished in the Golden Age of Greece. No other period or place can approach the brilliance of this age in its variety and completeness; in its inestimable value to the educated man.

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Certainly to the educated man the thought has at some time occurred, "What period in the history of the world has given most to the advancement of culture and learning?" During what age did the Muses shower their gifts most abundantly upon man? Out from amid the glories of many nations and many eras, there glows radiantly a single golden beam surpassing all in its brilliance. It is indeed a golden age—the Golden Age of Greece; that of all ages blessed by an abundance of genius not since given to any other era; an age of progress, one of art and letters; of drama and philosophy; of magnificent architecture and sculpture unrivaled. This was the Golden Age of Greece and its heart was Athens.

Hellas awoke one morning and found that Athens, from a small inland town, had risen to dizzy heights of beauty and splendor, the like of which the world will probably never see again. In 479 B.C. Athens, leveled to the ground by the Persian hordes of Xerxes, lie in ruins; in 429 B.C. the greatest works of the Golden Age had been accomplished. What miracle had taken place? How was it possible that within the lifetime of one man such a transformation could take place? There could be only one answer and that answer was genius. Out from amid the turmoil and confusion of reconstruction after the Persian War, there arose the figure of one man destined to show the world an era never to be repeated. This man was Pericles. Under his guidance Athens became the most progressive city in Greece—the center of wealth, learning, music, poetry, drama and sculpture. Indeed Pericles was a very fortunate statesman, for his life fell at a time when artistic genius was abundant.

A wave of inspiration seemed to pass over the architects and sculptors of Greece. Up from the ashes and destruction arose the Acropolis of Athens. Some of the greatest masterpieces the world has ever known adorned this citadel. The Parthenon and Propylea are among the famous temples on the Acropolis which call to

mind the architectural magnificence of this flourishing age. Both of these marvels were built under the guidance of the immortal Phidias, probably the greatest sculptor yet given to this world. His famous statue of Zeus, a colossal work in itself, expressed the mastery of his technique and reflected the height of Greek culture which was fast being attained.

It was during this era that painting first passed from the stage of vase and urn decoration. In the person of Polygnotus, the world receives its first real artist—a painter of character and morals; a man who could depict men as they ought to be. Here was the beginning of painting as we know it; the representation of emotions as well as forms.

From art we turn to letters. In two departments of literature, the drama and history, the achievements of the age of Pericles have never been surpassed, and in a third, the department of philosophy, the foundation was laid for triumphs not less splendid. A group of divinely gifted poets, beginning with Aeschylus, who had fought at Marathon, and Pindar, who was crowned poet laureate of the Olympic and Pythian Games, awoke as if by enchantment, and made the air of Greece tuneful with sweet and mighty song. Throngs of Athenians attended the plays held in the vast open air theaters. The playwrights produced series after series of unrivaled plays. Aeschylus and Sophocles sang of the gods and war in their tragedies, which were thronged with legendary and heroic figures. No less popular were the plays of Aristophanes, whose comedy served as an incarnation to Greece from the deep tragedies that prevailed.

Just as this age was not without poetry which made its appeal to the imagination and emotions, so it did not lack brilliant prose which leaned itself to reflection and criticism. It was during the Golden Age of Greece that the science of history was born. Herodotus, the Father of History, was the first to record in writing the customs and events of the world about him. Even as he so far excelled all who came before him, so in turn was he surpassed by his successor, Thucydides.

In the person of Thucydides the world obtained its first critical historian and the greatest historian of antiquity.

Hardly a field of learning was left untouched in the Athens of Pericles. Probably the greatest contribution handed down to posterity by the Greeks was their philosophy. The names of Socrates, Anexagoras and Democritus are well known in the philosophical world. It is remarkable what strides these men made in a pagan world shrouded in the mists of mythological and legendary lore. Socrates, through his pupil, Plato, determined the entire subsequent course of speculative thought for centuries to follow. The Greek philosophers of the Golden Age showed the way in their field, and up to this day their works are regarded as basic in the science of philosophy.

Never again has the world made such rapid progress as that which marked the rise of Athens. Never again has the world produced such a flow of genius as deluged the Golden Age of Greece. It is remarkable how so many men of such great talent could have been assembled in one place and in such a short span of years. Within half a century, Athens had not only seen the works of men, most of which have not been surpassed to this day, but she had the rare privilege of witnessing the genius of the pioneer. The contributions of many of her sons marked in themselves the beginning of new sciences, or at least tremendous advancements in sciences already begun. Within the Golden Age, the Grecian styles of architecture, still used today, were developed; painting as we know it now was given its start; the drama and the theater were established with customs which have been a part of practically every play since; philosophical thinking was at last begun and truth became the quest of man. Indeed, there was a guiding light shining down upon Athens, and beneath the brilliance of its glow, all Greece was tinted with a golden hue. It was genius and the Golden Age of Greece.

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